



BEN OKRI'S ABIKU TRILOGY: A POST-COLONIAL PROPOSITION

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ABSTRACT

Ben Okri is indisputably the most innovative, progressive and post-colonial writer of modern age. He is intrinsically touched by the stark realities of Nigeria, and writes instinctively about poverty, myths, traditions, customs, rituals, political corruption and the socio-cultural diversity with adroitness. His extant works exudes post-colonial leaning and spirit invariably. Okri's most famous Abiku's trilogy in which a child named Azaro or Abiku navigates between two ostensibly opposed worlds, one is of earthly people and another is a spiritual world. Like Azaro or Abiku entering into a vicious circle, the country was ensnared in its own history never accomplishing to be a self-sufficient, self-governing state. This Abiku trilogy set at the point of independence and reveals the failure of Nigeria as an independent nation state, in which Okri showed that the current political gimmicks, shenanigans, thuggery, dictatorship and domestic neo-colonialism. Throughout the whole trilogy, Okri discussed how the educated elites ride on the back of the poor, uneducated and ordinary people of Nigeria. Therefore, the main purpose of this paper is to make a postcolonial reading of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* trilogy.

KEY WORDS: Post-colonialism, abiku, struggle, political affirmation, African- Nigerian nation.

Post-colonialism deals with the effects of colonisation on cultures and societies. The term was used first by the historians after the second World War to denote "the post-colonial state". Thus, the term 'post-colonialism' is used widely to colonial and postcolonial period, it has been limited to European colonialism from the sixteenth century up to and including the neo-colonialism of the present day. However, the traces of colonialism can still be observed in the post-colonial period, an impact on the psyche, culture and identity of the once colonized people. Post-colonialism is a legacy of our colonial past, a legacy of the subjugation and suppression of the colonized by the colonizer that pervades a way to de-colonized after World War II. Post-colonialism can be referred to as- "-----different forms of representations, reading practices and values." (Rai, 2005:1).

After World War II, the people of Africa fought to end the effects of European imperialism to achieve political independence and reclaim African culture. The newly born African states were unstable and struggled to deal with conflicts, after resulting in Civil Wars and genocide. And Okri showed these current issues like political corruption, militarism, poverty, famine, violence in his utmost works. In his writings Okri has experimented with new literary forms, different styles and traditions. His writing style is mixed with realism, modernism and oral forms especially those of Yoruba culture. This style has been characterized as an example of magic realism with African flavour, although he has emphasized the realistic dimensions of his work-myths and local beliefs are part of the real world, not that they exist next to the real world. Okri started writings as a realist with Nigerian English dialects and modernist narrative strategies to explore a modern context with historical issues.

Ben Okri is an eminent post-colonial and post-modern writer of African-Nigerian literature. Okri's fiction accurately portrays the complex and confusing post-colonial, post-modern world. All his great works represent his interpretation of history and the world, and their influence on life and society. He is considered a Black British writer although his Nigerian affiliations still remain strong. Okri was born on March 15, 1959 in Minna, Northern Nigeria to an Igbo mother and Urhobo father. Okri starts his career with his first novel *Flowers and Shadows* (1979) which dealt with the difficulties of Urhobo existence in Nigeria. Okri's second novel *The Landscape Within* published in (1981), and after a five-year silence, he published a collection of short stories entitled *Incidents at the Shrine* (1986). Upon its reception it becomes clear that Okri was developing a distinctive multi perspective narrative capable of transmitting a more profound sense of African reality at a formal level. But the immense popularity within the world Okri gained with the publication of his Booker Prize winning novel *The Famished Road* (1991) which later extends into an Abiku trilogy. He is the youngest ever winner of the Man Booker Prize. In writing of *The Famished Road*, Okri took inspiration from the work of Amos Tutuola, who in turn had borrowed many supernatural elements from Yoruba oral narratives. *The Famished Road* (1991) along with *Songs of Enchantment* (1993) and *Infinite Riches* (1998) make up a trilogy that follows the life of Azaro or Abiku, a spirit child narrator, through the social and political turmoil of an African nation reminiscent of Okri's remembrance of war-torn Nigeria.

In his writings Okri maintains a fluent attention to realistic details. He is a keen observant of every moment those happened in Nigeria, and it makes him different from earlier generation of social realist Nigerian writers. Okri is post-modern, post-colonial writer and his fiction is a critique of postcolonial dis-

course, especially his Abiku trilogy that selected for the study in this present paper, is a social protest and a medium of political affirmation.

The Famished Road (1991):- The Booker Prize winning novel *The Famished Road* follows the life of a spirit child 'Azaro or Abiku', who is pressured into leaving the mortal world but due to his personal and familial ties insists in remaining on earth. In Yoruba term, Abiku (or Ogbanje in Igbo) is believed to be a part of human and a part of spirit, bound to the eternal cycle of life, death and re-birth. As the literal meaning of Abiku is 'one who is born to die'. Abiku is continually followed by his sibling spirits. They want to bring him back into their spirit realm but Azaro is not willing to return back. He gradually allowed his wonder at the living world and love for his improvised earthly parents. Azaro's anti Abiku commitment to life cannot be parallel to the nation's readiness to move forward for the reasons that it has shown itself to be unready to move forward. The nation is repeatedly described in the trilogy as

"Dying from a lack of vision, too much greed and corruption, not enough love and too many divisions" (p.8).

Okri throws a light on the condition of the nation or its people. The thugs robbed the country on the name of politics, where Azaro, the spirit child narrator and his parents live was burning in the fire of bad politics. The war was fighting between the powerful and the weakened. The nation is divided into two political parties The Party of The Poor and The Party of The Rich. People have no hope for their good days; a choice is made between the living and the dying. The condition of the Abiku child, who vacillates between wanting to the live and die, continually resist to his spirit companions in order to bring happiness to his family, symbolizes the possibilities that there will be an end to suffering in Nigeria.

The Famished Road is set during the historical moment of Nigeria's independence from the British colonial ruled in 1960. Through this Yoruba (Abiku) myth, Okri portrays the social, economic and political situation of Nigeria on the verge of self-government and the failure of the nation as an independent nation. According to Felicia Oka Moh, the continuous birth and death of Azaro is parallel to the political history of Nigeria. Azaro is-

"On his fifth round to the earth; a parallel to the five eras of government in Nigeria".

-(Moh, Ben Okri: An Introduction to His Early Fiction P.29)

After independence the Nigerians were in dreaming to turn in Nigeria into a great nation, but many factors such as governmental ineptitude, political and social disillusionment in the country destroying all the hope of a great visionary nation. The poor are either victims of the rich or their own passivity and ignorance. Okri accuses the Nigerian old generation of complicity with both their white and black exploiters. He denounces the new black elites with white colonizers for the destruction of a bright future of African continent after independence.

Songs of Enchantment (1993):- Okri's second spirit narrative, a sequel to Abiku's trilogy continues the adventures of Azaro or Abiku in a mythic African village surrounded by corruption and bad politics. On one moment Dad says -

"Africa is the home of the world, and look at how we live in this world.....poverty everywhere, wickedness, greed, injustice all over the place, goats wanting to lead the country, cows running for elections, rats scheming to become governors. This could be the great garden of the earth, but it is now a backyard" (p.126).

Once again Nigerian local life is reflected through the strange category defying consciousness of Azaro, who didn't want to born but due to affection of his earthly parents decide to stay on earth. Like the first one, *Songs of Enchantment* is also an account of the political turmoil between the parties of the Rich and the Poor, two social categories which are at great enmity.

On the other the barwoman Madame Koto, chief exponent of The Party of The Rich, whose greed turns her into 'the great whore of the Apocalypse' (p.377) alternately exudes portentous metaphysical malaise and miraculous erotic force. Madame Koto spell over Azaro's mother and she hardly recover from her enchantment. Azaro's earthly father Dad is a sceptic person who has neither inhibition when it comes to neither renouncing society's hypocrites, nor tolerance for the artificial limitations imposed on him by politics. He is a reasonable man, a community conscience or a scoffer of politics. But he lost his sight and politicians risk the villagers with adulterer foodstuffs. When Dad suddenly arises one evening, he says-

"I am converted- I am blinded- I am beginning to see" (p.499)

Azaro's father regains his sight in a healing and this transformation in Dad is to lead the crystallization of his hitherto partly- formed political vision for Africa's liberation.

Infinite Riches (1998):- Ben Okri's *Infinite Riches* is the third and the last vol. of The Famished Road trilogy which continues the adventures of Abiku child in this chaotic world of his African village. The spirit child Azaro still watches the tumultuous and tender lives of the living. As the novel opens, Nigeria is on the verge of independence and elections loom. Azaro's earthly father Dad is arrested for a murder which he didn't commit. A local carpenter was murdered and Dad wrongly arrested for this murder. Azaro's mother Mum is angered at the arrest of her husband and searches for him all over the town with seven elite women. They are looking him from one police station to another and all through town making their presence known and demanding the release of Dad, who is savagely beaten in custody. After several inexhaustible campaigning he finally released. But now he is a changed man, mentally scarred. When these eight women embarked on their quest to release Black Tyger, they were met by a group of educated women those later found a way to appropriate the credit to themselves by conniving with their allies in the media and getting popularity in newspapers. This behaviour becomes the new class system after the attainment of independence in most African countries where those who struggled for independence were mostly different from those who assumed the reins of power.

After a foray into Azaro's other world, Okri smoothly returns to the brutality of the real world. As political parties gear up for a pre- election rally, the ravings of Madame Koto – bar owner rumoured witch and people's politician- cast an ominous shadow. Nigeria moves a new era but has first to live through chaos, like a bacchanalian scene from revelation, to emerge the other side with some semblance of hope. Nigeria completely governed by corruption, totalitarianism of politicians who boastfully say-

"----victory is ours already, we have won----those who vote for us will enjoy, those who don't will eat dustbins" (p.261-62)

"No one was sure who was really the enemy" (p.71)

However, the politicians are no different from the colonist. In this book Okri showed that the current political gimmicks, shenanigans, thuggery and corruption began at the second birth of (colonial period) the new continent.

Throughout the whole trilogy, Okri showed the discrimination of the people by the people and the parties, and the homogeneous corruption of the political activist against the beggary lives of the people, struggled between two political parties, who take the mental power once the colonist has granted the colony its independence continues unabated. Okri also discussed how the educated elites of Africa dominate to the poor, uneducated, ordinary people and robbed them on the name of government. Okri's story is dark and often tragic as his writing was much impacted by the Biafra War and the very socio- political condition of Africa. This African consciousness leads him to the use of mythical, spiritual and folkloric elements along with socio- political and historical issues. As we find in his worldly known Abiku trilogy, which is set during the historical moment of Nigeria's independence. And the nation independence created a great shock from which Nigeria could never recover, entering into a vicious circle. The country was ensnared in its own history never accomplishing to be a self- sufficient, self- governing state. But Okri is hopeful, as he says -

"our country is an Abiku country. Like the spirit child it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain. It will become strong" (p.547).

To keep country alive the Nigerians, have to think in a different way, overcome

their forgetfulness, forwardness and re-dream their past to heel their future. *"The only way to get out of Africa is to get Africa out of you" (p.553).* For Okri this is the only way of solving the crises of democracy in Nigeria, Africa, and moreover throughout the world.

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